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Allegories through material

Ian Bassett

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts
Masters in Fine Arts

Allegories Through Material

By *Ian Michael Bassett*

May 30, 2013

Committee Approvals

Richard Hirsch

Jane Shellenbarger

Andy Buck

Abstract

Through my experience I have found that all things have a function. I am particularly drawn to the utilitarian object and it's ability to transform the world around us. Nails, bricks, writing quills and various other functional objects have had a profound affect on the development of humans. These objects, which were created out of need, have propelled humans on an evolutionary process allowing for mechanical advantages, that then allow for growth.

The utilitarian object has the ability, through symbol and metaphor, to articulate my personal interests in words, language, labor, time, perceptions, and value. I am re-interpreting and re-contextualizing functional objects and their assumed function to create sculpture. I am altering the original material of an object, its scale or creating a new context through this relationship between material and object. I am developing a language whereby I make comments on the relevance of these objects in a greater cultural and personal context.

Utilizing words as components in the sculptures comes from my curiosity of the importance of language: how we use letters to construct words, words to form sentences, the difference between written and spoken words and the translations from thought or internal dialogue. In all of these cases I am interested in how these words, thoughts and ideas are perceived by other people.

We all have assumptions about the value of objects, and develop words defining our own experiences with these objects over time. The value of communication lies in our ability to share and understand our own perceptions in relation to universal feelings

My work explores process and material relationships to create new interpretations and re-contextualization of utilitarian objects that have helped humans in an evolutionary process. The values of objects and the assumed roles they have played in the development of humans is what I comment on through my sculptures.

“Presently I am very aware of trying to make particular kinds of objects to create just the right sort of link between my world and myself... I feel better then ever about making things with my hands...Even with the logic and joinery that requires, the work can still be like nature having a sense of its own growth contained in it. I want to approach that kind of wholeness no matter how made or controlled it is.”

-Martin Puryear

Discussion of sources and research

The vocabulary of objects that I am choosing to work with had to fit the criteria of:

- An object that is utilitarian
- Commonly used and understood
- Fundamentally simple
- Affected the evolution of people

I did not choose to create an abstract body of work based on forms, shapes, line, or other various other qualities of art, but through a set of parameters or framework comprised of objects chosen for their basic character. Formal elements are considered in my work but are not the focal point in my decision making for each sculpture. I am interpreting objects that fit the four mentioned criteria and that have a resonating connection with me. The entire exhibition is a self-reflection about many of my influences, interests and concepts which have shaped my life and who I am. I feel that each sculpture should tell an individual story while exhibiting a common thread stitching all the sculptures together.

Nails

The nail can join, connect and fasten material together. The nail's functionality is in essence a wedge. The wedge is able to, not only connect and bond material, but is able to separate material. I found these two opposing functions intriguing. A Jackie Winsor

piece, *Nail Piece* is an example of utilizing a nail's inherent function; to bond material together through an artistic fashion.



(Winsor, 58)

Implementing the interpretation of the masonry nail originated when I was at the Hungerford Urban Artists in Rochester, NY. The building is built of brick, and I noticed hundreds of nails wedged between the brick mortar of the building walls. I began removing them and noticed that these were not the typical nails, with which I was familiar. Their shape and form to me was attractive. I removed several dozen of them and began to think about the inherent function of the masonry nail: attaching wood to concrete or mortar joints.

I gravitated toward the nail because I have been using them to build objects all my life. I think of how the nail and the wedge have affected and shaped the development of humans, and then I reflect about how the nail and the wedge have shaped my own life. The nail embodies characteristics of being; elemental, primal, profound and essential that defines a large part of who I am as an artist and as a maker.

Evidence of the nail or some type of object based on the principal of a wedge can be seen throughout the history of mankind. The wedge is a simple machine, a mechanical device.

Mechanical advantage=length/width.

The first nails were actually made of bronze, found in Egypt dating back to 3400 BC, but the wedge was the first tool/machine ever made. The exact time when the wedge was invented is unknown but evidence can be seen that the wedge was and still is the most primal tool/machine ever invented. Most likely made from stone during the Prehistoric time period by Apes, mankind's ancestors

The wedge fundamentally exemplifies the human species' ability to refine through invention and development. These simple tools: an ax, knife, nails and screws, are basic forms that have affectively transformed the world around us. Where would human evolution be without the most commonly applied machine in the world, the wedge? The invention and discovery of the nail and its inherent ability to wedge material and thus connect with one another resonated with me, and I became interested in using a nail within my visual vocabulary.

Beside the function, which the nail serves in the construction of things, I am interested in the value of the nail and wedge. Their values have diminished and have been forgotten. During American Colonial times families would gather by the hearth of the fire and make nails all night long. A lot of time and labor went into making nails during this time period, prior to mass-production during the industrial revolution. The following day the family would use the nails that they had spent all night on making to build houses, and

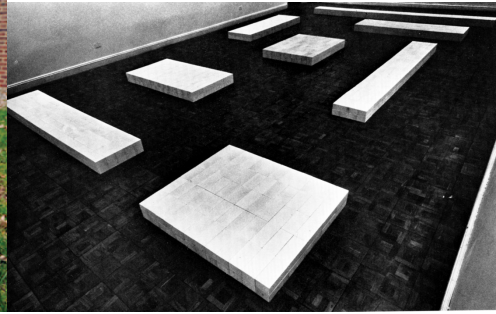
various other structures. I am interested in the compounded labor and the time that has gone into making the nails as related to the time and labor in building structures. If the family would relocate or needed to completely rebuild a structure they would set a fire the building and retrieve all the nails from the ashes and reapply them to constructing a new building. The nail to me is symbolic of work and labor, which embodies who I am and what my works conveys.

Bricks

As a ceramic artist I cannot escape the relevance of the brick because it's made of clay. The brick is fired in a kiln that is made up of bricks. It is this type of ironic connection I find compelling and wish to exploit. I am drawn to the brick for its simplicity. The Mesopotamians were the first to make and use the brick as a construction material for larger structures. Every civilization on the earth at one time period applied the simple brick to construct buildings and other structures. Gestalt theory states the sum is greater than all of the parts. I have adapted this concept when looking at buildings made of bricks. One brick is not of much value but when combined with thousands of other bricks they can create large monumental structures. I enjoy this versatility that the brick embodies and the fundamental value that is created from such a rudimentary object. Carl Andre and Jackie Winsor utilize bricks in their work; I have referenced their approach of working with the brick to aid in understanding my interpretations and organization of the bricks to create sculptures.



“Brick Dome” (Winsor, 60)



“Equivalents I-VIII” Andre, (54-55)

Language

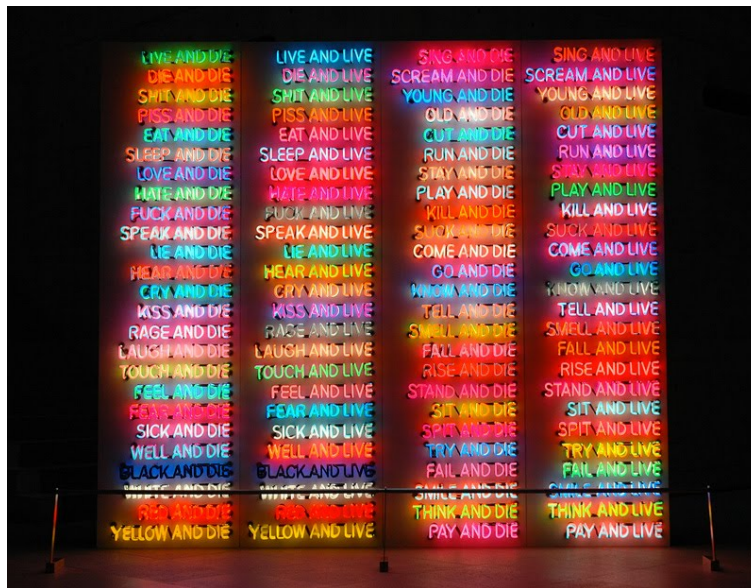
“ The fact is that I am not concentrating on the words, you are. So you in a way are sculpting these words, deconstructing them trying to cut them into pieces and see what they mean and remake them. I am doing that perhaps as well but not directly with words, with the meaning of the practice I want something much bigger and broader, to open up the definition of sculpture.” (Orozco, 49)

The origin of language is a mystery and one that may never be solved but is singly the most crucial element in the development of mankind. Language allows humans to attain a great deal. We are the only species that communicate through the act of documenting our thoughts through the use of written words. This documentation is a way to physically see thoughts, an ability which separates us from other animals, offering access to past knowledge and allowing us to apply that information presently. Learning from the past is another trait of language that separates humans from animal who evolve adaptively and instinctually. The invention and development of language is fundamental to defining what it is to be human. The use of language exemplifies the human ability to share

personal experiences. The methods by which we share our own experiences with others is where my work is focused. We are all humans shaped by different experiences, which we attempt to share with others through the use of language.

Communication through language never is a perfect transference of meaning. I am interested in how each individual formulates words to express their ideas and thoughts to others. Communication through our chosen words can be clearly understood, misconceived or just not understood at all. I consider how everyone uses words differently to communicate what's on their minds, be it through the documentation of language or speaking. I consider how each individual carefully uses specific words and their importance, how words can be so hurtful, informative, beautiful, and fragile. I think word choices characterize each person. An individual composes an identity through their use and interpretation of language. The value of this expression really shapes and sculpts who they are and how they are interpreted.

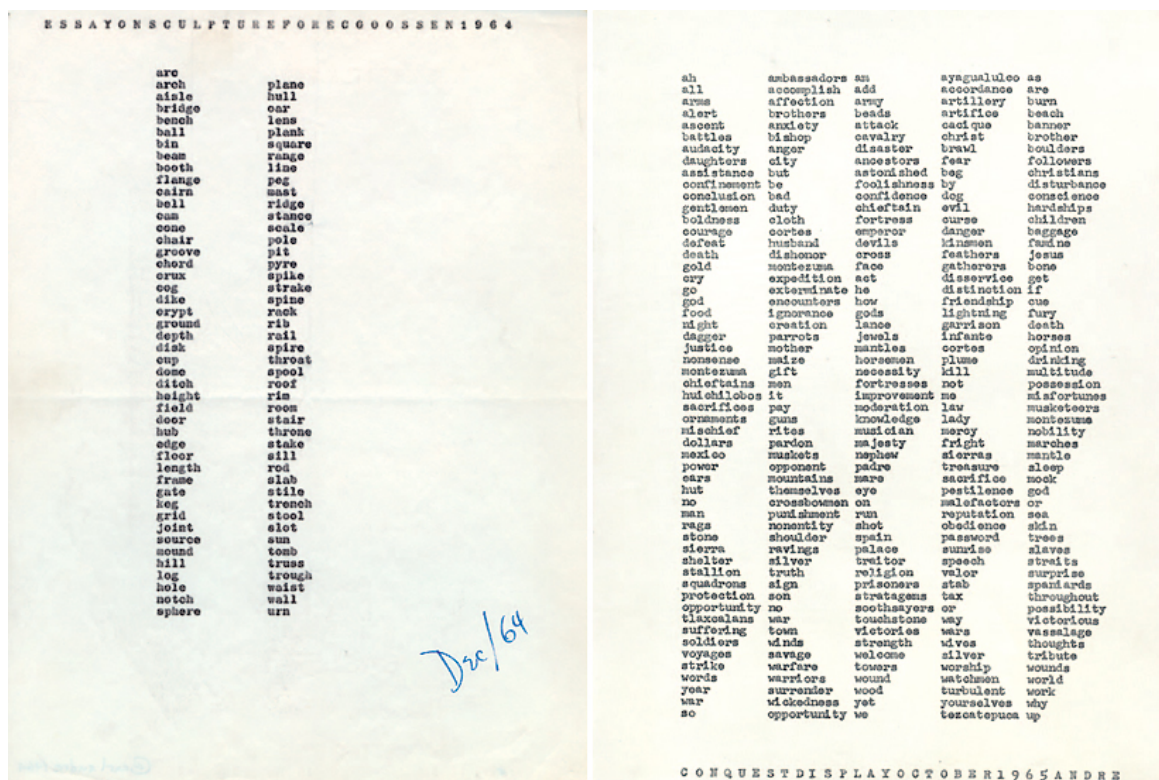
It was my initial research into artists like Bruce Nauman and Carl Andre that spiked my interest in the translation of text into art. I was intrigued by their ability to span numerous planes of understanding language through written word, spoken word and constructed word.



"One Hundred Live and Die" (Nauman, 20)



"Violins Violence and Silence" (Nauman, 45)



“Essay on Sculpture”, (Andre, 154)

“Conquest Display” (Andre, 140)

What do I use to represent my interest in language? I began to think of what tools humans use to write with, referencing history I decided to re-contextualize and interpret the writing quill. I felt the quill was able to symbolize and reference the language component in my work. Up until the industrial revolution where paper began to be mass-produced the quill was the main writing implement in the western world for over 200 years. The quill did not last when paper was mass-produced because the paper was too hard and rough, the writing quill would wear down quickly from the contact with the paper.

Time and value

In my thesis body of work I consider time and value. Time is an essential characteristic shared by the objects to which I make reference. Time is ephemeral, but I think of time almost as a material. I evoke time as a theme in my work through the process of making illustrated in the sculptures through; period of usage of an object, surfaces, colors and organization of components in my sculptures. Time is a measure and marks all. I think of time as the most valuable thing each individual has, it can never be replaced or gained.

What makes something valuable? How are certain objects more valuable than others and why? Value is dependent on an individual's own interpretation or perception of each object. We often think of valuable objects as precious metals or jewels but we often forget about these very common things that we have that are really valuable: tools to help construct and build, words that help ideas take a physical shape.

Words are valuable; they are fundamental in expressing ourselves and how we communicate with one another. The mode of communication that one uses to express their thoughts is the most valuable tool one has. I think of words as tools. These tools allow one to express oneself and to communicate and share thoughts with one another. My work creates metaphoric associations among the quill, the nail, brick and language and how they have developed and shaped humans and the impact they have made on us.

Critical Analysis

Internal reflections influencing work

Throughout my entire life I have worked with my hands. I have always been drawn to handmade objects and focused my life to involve acts of making things with my hands. My interest in the making of things can be rooted in my childhood toys. Lincoln logs, Legos, blocks, tinker toys and various other toys that encouraged the making of objects. While growing up, I worked on cars, in construction, as a farm hand among other jobs. I enjoyed the physical labor and being able to work with my hands. There is a great satisfaction of looking back on what was completed in just a day's work. This love of making and the gratitude I experienced on reflection of what my own two hands could complete resonated with me and has informed my artwork.

Clay's ability to be shaped and formed into anything imaginable was always such an attraction to me, but I wanted more. Before coming to graduate school I was working with mixed media. I noticed that my strong foundation in sculpting clay was allowing me to transfer many of the skills, mechanics and techniques and apply them to other mediums. I am attracted to the difficulty and the problem solving that is involved with creating.

I saw within different mediums the overlapping process related to mold making. I thought about the casting process, in ceramics, glass and foundry work and saw a lot of similarities but also realized many differences. This encouraged me to explore these

differences and extract the common practices with the various mold-making processes. I became intrigued with the similarities and differences that the working processes of various materials offered. My work was able to exploit these within the themes and contexts of the pieces. The crossover through materials adds to the symbol and metaphor, for the choice of words in language and value.

I chose to use glass, bronze, iron, porcelain and terracotta as the main materials to explore in the making of my thesis body of work. Through various mediums, I illustrate how the materiality can illustrate my encompassing concept: the value and importance of utilitarian objects to the development of people and explore how material value provokes assumed value.

Conclusion

Reflection and Analysis of Sculptures

Wedge Wheel

Terracotta and mortar

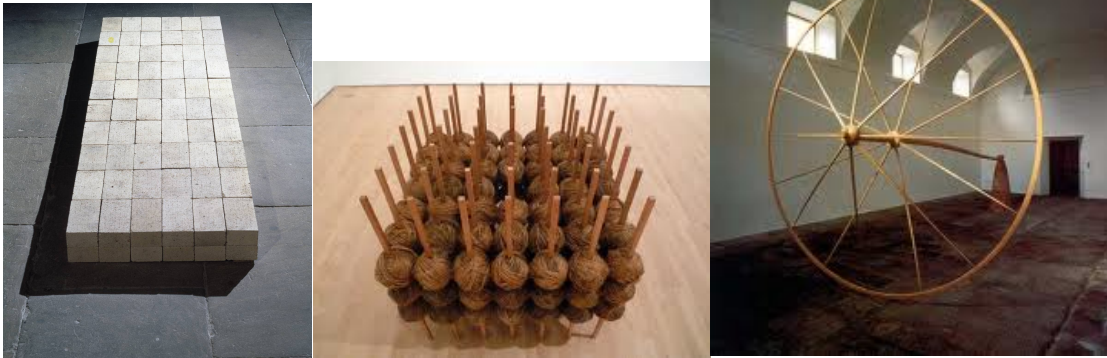
5' in diameter

What do bricks do, what is the brick's inherent function? A brick is defined as a single unit of ceramic material that when combined with other bricks and another material, mortar, they are able to build simple to complex structures. The simplicity of the brick intrigues me. Bricks can be defined by permanence and strength; a common object playing an important role in the development of civilizations across the world. I wanted to refer to the strength and importance of the brick to that of an iron masonry nail. This

union exhibits commonalities between the material functions of the masonry nail and bricks.

I started by referencing the masonry nail form through a rapid increase of scale reaching a length of nearly four feet. This single, though large, object did not seem to encompass the breadth of commentary that I was hoping to expound. I began to make multiple smaller terracotta nails and titled them “brick nails”. The brick and the nail are components in my Thesis vocabulary that I wanted to comment on through their physical relationships in the *Wedge Wheel* sculpture. As I was amassing the terracotta brick nails I struggled to figure out a form or structure that I felt would be visually interesting and a shape that would represent my concepts.

I often asked myself; specifically what do I want to say with this piece? I came to a few conclusions; I wanted to make a monolithic like structure, I wanted to physically illustrate the scale of a single brick as related to a composition of bricks joined with hundreds of other bricks. My aim was to make a form that was visually interesting, structurally stable, and the form would have to be symbolic of strength.



“Equivalent V” (Andre, 14) *“#2 Copper”* (Winsor, 75) *“Desire”* (Puryear, 81)

Artist as, Carl Andre, Jackie Winsor and Martin Puryear were influential in the conceptualizing of this piece. I was looking for a hint or clue in helping me figure out the form that I would construct with the brick nails. After looking at several examples of their sculptures, I choose to construct 4 circles composed of 144 individual brick nails. They then would be mortared in sections 4 brick nails high and then these 36 sections of 4 brick nails then would be mortared with one another building a vertical ring 5 feet in diameter.

These artists and their sculptures are influential and important to my work in that they are so focused on process and material. They all have their own sensibility of how they handle materials. From bricks, steel, to wood; their sculptures expound on the materiality of each medium they are utilizing. These artists were influential to how I handle various materials. Their work also influences my conceptual thoughts and how I communicate them through different mediums.

Transcription

Cast iron, welded steel

5.5' x 1' x 1.75'

Words and language are main elements that separate us from other animals. Our ability to communicate through composed sound or by a means of documentation has benefited the development of humans. In some form or another, language is used by each human and has specific value to each person, which allows for expression of thoughts and ideas. I enjoy the thought that everyone uses their own personal vocabulary to express him or herself to share their thoughts; the way in which letters make words, words makes sentences, sentences make thoughts and ideas that then are communicated and interpreted others. This communication is in essence what I am interested in; it allows humans to evolve exponentially by the sharing of idea, thoughts, experience and knowledge.

What object can represent and communicate on these concepts that also contains metaphoric symbolism to these ideas? I am using the writing quill to visually and physically represent my concepts by making it large and of cast iron; an archival, a strong, heavy, dense material. My thoughts were to comment on the universal understanding of value, importance, the significance of language, and the role it has had to the evolution of humans.

Iron is strong dense and permanent, characteristics that are not associated with a quill feather. Altering the material to a heavy medium I am creating an ironic relationship between the quill, which is known to be light, soft, and fragile. Increasing the size of the

quill I am further developing the irony of this piece. Now the large iron quill is useless not only through the material but through scale as well. By taking a feather, which is utilized by people as a writing tool (quill), and re-contextualizing it through scale and material (iron), I am exploiting the contrasting materials and perceptions from which material an object is made. In a sense this is making expounding ironic-ness through contrasting materials. I wanted to technically push my skills by working large, which is a challenge especially when making resin bonded sand molds for castings. As a larger sculpture in the exhibition I wanted this work to activate space, volume, and environment. I also knew that I was going to have several small sculptures so I wanted to have some balance between intimate pieces and the larger ones in the exhibition space.

Mechanical Advantage

China Clay, photo resist and gold luster

5 x 18"x 3.5"x 1"

The masonry nail is typically used to bond wood or other materials to brick or concrete. I am referencing this type of nail because it has the ability to bond material to bricks or concrete. This specifically is an interest in conjunction with the other materials that I am applying in the exhibition. This type of nail also allows me to use the planer surfaces to apply imagery relation to the materialness and concepts in the exhibition.

This piece is focused around material. By using porcelain I am removing the function of the nail and raising the question, is the value decreased being unable to perform their inherent function? By re-creating the nails in a material that is often thought to be precious, and of higher value then other clays I am contrasting the materiality of the

porcelain verses steel or iron a strong, hard material. Increasing the scale of the object also further develops the idea of removing the function of the nail as an object. The function of the nail has been changed by material and scale. Is the value of the objects lost? For me personally the worth of objects can be viewed in different lights. I see objects of value that have history, a story behind them, sentimental value. I also see utilitarian objects of high value since these functional objects have played a profound and critical role in every human's life. I am not disregarding the material value, but I have chosen mediums to work with which conceptual and ideas.

Being that my thesis work is narrative and that each individual piece communicates a different idea and thought, I felt that a piece was needed to further link the body of work. I am using the glazed surface of the slip cast nails as a canvas on which to apply imagery. The images are visual aids referencing the concepts and ideas of the sculptures throughout the entire thesis exhibition. They link the sculptures in the exhibition to generate metaphorical relationships between each work in the gallery space acting as a narrator of the exhibition, connecting all of the work conceptually and visually.

Page after Page

China clay, cast glass with bronze inclusion with gold luster

8.5" x 11" x 48"

Page after Page is a piece that comments on the value of words, communication and the importance of the documentation of the language. The porcelain column is composed of individual cast sheets of slip with a paper cellulose. On top of the column is a kiln casted glass quill with a bronze inclusion as the portion of the object that would make contact

with the paper for writing. The construction of this work is apparent through multiples and details such as the deckled edges of the pages, as well as the fragile and delicate material from which it is made, in turn referencing time and value.

By applying porcelain as the material to represent hand made paper I am commenting on value through the material, porcelain being a precious material. The deckled edge, referenced earlier, is communicating the aspect of time and history, as well as the hand made. The form of stacked paper is tall standing alone composed of hundreds of sheets. The papers value lies in the function acting as a substrate to write on, the value of the quill as writing tool which is no longer used since paper now is manufactured making it more difficult for writing due to its rough texture. The relationship of historical developments of the quill and the paper exemplify how value is inherently linked with time and our perception of these objects in relation to necessity and production.

Page after Page is representational of time. Time in the sense of the process of individually casting each sheet, the time and labor that is taken to fill each sheet with ones thoughts as a means to share ideas or for documentation. Relating my processes, material and my ideas is important to me. All three elements are linked and create dialogues with one another to translate visual and conceptual interests.

The Exhibition *Allegories Through Material* was a success. The spacing in the gallery was not ideal being very long and narrow. I would have wanted a floor plan that was

open allowing for more interactions, with all the sculptures. This would have aided in visual interest and conceptual narration, overall improving the show.

I look at the exhibition as a personal narration of my interests and elements that have shaped who I am today. The work also aims to communicate the value of the often-overlooked utilitarian objects that are crucial to the development of the human civilization. I am not saying that people take these objects for granted, but I ask the questions, where would the human race be without the discovery of these simple universally utilitarian objects?

“ When I work with objects, I focus very much on the object itself. I am not thinking about contemporary sculpture or traditions, or how to break with this or that. I am focusing on the material I have in front of me.” (Orozco, 109)



Transforming Translucent Translations

Blown glass, cast bronze, thrown porcelain and photo resist etching.

18"x 5"x 5"

2012



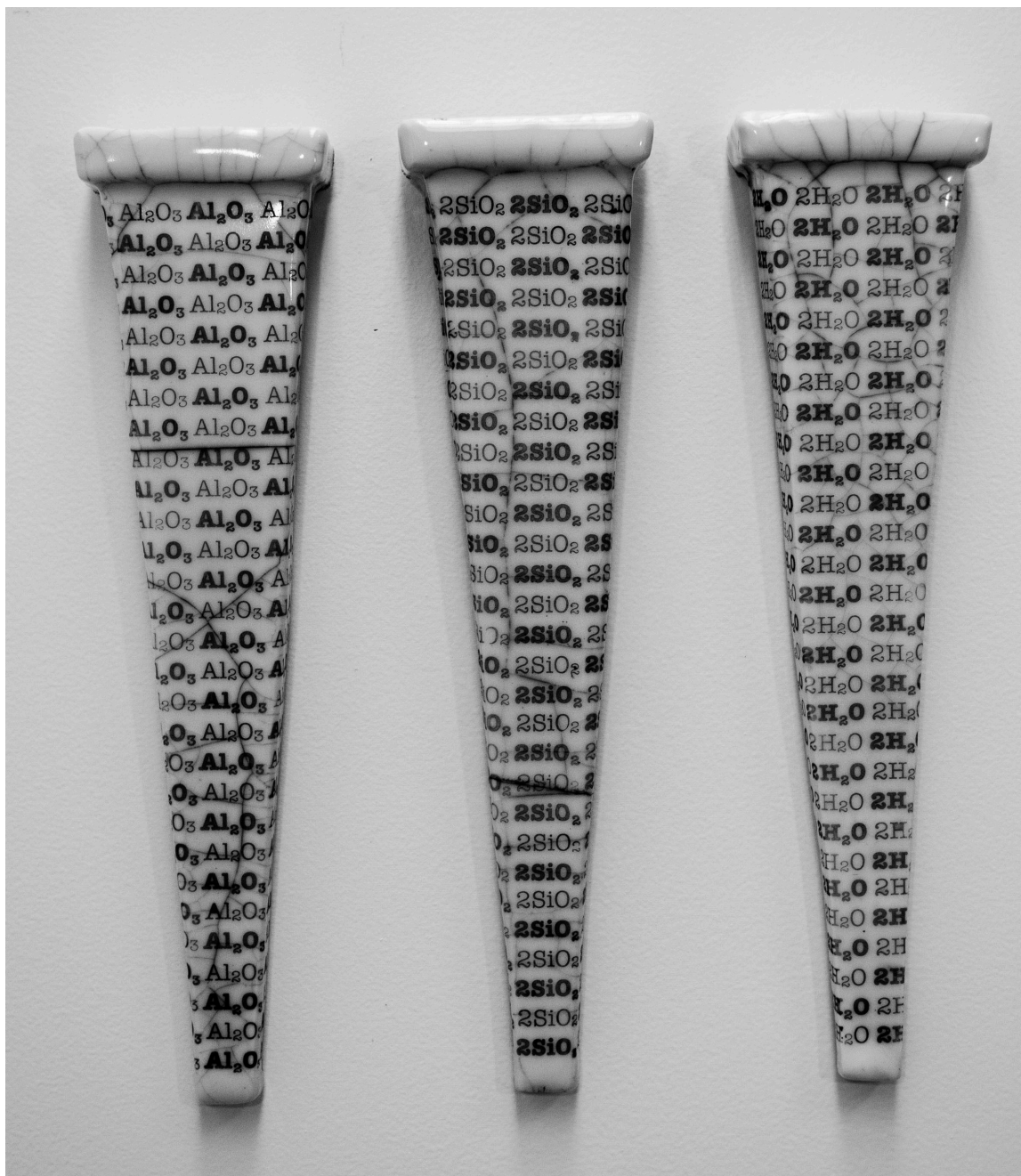
Mechanical Advantage

Slip cast porcelain, photo resist etching, gold luster and ink
5x 18"x 3.5"x 1"
2013



Preserved Process

Cast bronze, porcelain, photo resist and Spanish cedar
6" x 15"x 6"
2013



Al₂O₃ 2SiO₂ 2H₂O Wedge

3x 18"x 3.5"x 1"

Slip cast porcelain, photo resist and ink

2012



Page After Page

Slip cast porcelain, cast glass with bronze inclusion and gold luster

48"x 8.5"x 11"

2013



The Bronze Age
Cast bronze with patina
18"x 3.5" x 1"
2012



Wedge Wheel
Terracotta and mortar
5' x 1" x 5"
2013



Transcription
Cast iron and welded steel
5.5' x 1' x 1.75'
2012



Instruments
Slip cast porcelain and found object
3"x 3"x 3"
2013



Arche-type
Porcelain, blown glass, bronze and found objects
16"x 8"x 4"
2013

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